

American Literature Study Circle

Compiled by SMITA BASU



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Working Committee

The American Literature Study Circle working committee displays the Circle's publication, "Studies in American Literature" (1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005). (From left) Dr. Aninda Basu Roy, Dr. Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, Dr. Shobha Chattopadhyay, Dr. Krishna Sen, Professor Amitava Roy and Ashok Sengupta. The founding working committee included Aparajita Nanda of Jadavpur University. After Nanda went to teach in Berkeley, California, in 2004, Dr. Chattopadhyay was invited to represent Jadavpur University.

governor of West Bengal and grandson of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

This year's annual conference will focus on "Reconfiguring Identity: Bridging Faiths and Cultures." The meetings and discussions will attempt to bridge divisions between cultural orientations by encouraging critical perspectives that unite the global and the local, the distant and the familiar. The Study Circle will also release the fifth volume of its journal, "Studies in American Literature."

The objective of the American Literature Study Circle was to provide an active academic platform for those engaged in diverse research fields relating to American studies. Though it began with a focus on mainstream American literature, it has gradually branched out into diverse critical fields, such as popular culture, environment and ecology, globalization, multiculturalism, African American studies, Asian American studies, gender studies, terrorism and peace studies, nationalism and transnationalism, American literary criticism and socio-cultural theory. Apart from these purely academic pursuits, there have been several programs on American films and music, as well as translation workshops to render American poetry into Bengali, creating lively interactive environments for members of all age groups.

The active dissemination of American studies by the Study Circle has provided its members with a locus for deepening their knowledge, and the outcome has been a broadening and strengthening of American studies in eastern Indian universities and has lead to the introduction of American literature at the undergraduate level in several colleges and universities where it had not been taught. Continued requests from undergraduate college teachers for familiarization programs on teaching American literature texts resulted in the Study Circle arranging summer courses over the past four years. They have been held at different venues like the American Center,

Previous Anniversary Seminars

American Literature and South Asian Visions (1998)

American Critical Theories in the 20th Century (1999)

Pop Goes Culture (2000)

Environment and Culture: American Literature and Literary Discourses (2001)

Crossing Borders: American, Asian and Postcolonial Literatures (2002)

Literature, Peace and Globalization (2003)

American Literature and Civil Society (2004)

Internationalizing American Studies (2005)

Writing America: Intercultural Dialogs (2006)

A Decade of Reading, Sharing, Learning and Teaching

The first program of the American Literature Study Circle on August 28, 1997, was a digital video conference on "Asian American Writers," held in the Lincoln Room in the American Center in Kolkata. Twenty-five founding members attended, all of them die-hard aficionados of American literature.

Today, the Circle has grown much wider, boasting a vibrant membership of more than 300 academics, researchers and students in eastern and northeastern India. As the group prepares to host its 10th international conference on American Literature, in September, it continues a busy schedule of monthly and bimonthly lectures, discussions, poetry and play readings, translation sessions and film discussion programs. Speakers include senior college and university faculty members, research scholars, writers, poets and graduate students from

India, the United States and other countries.

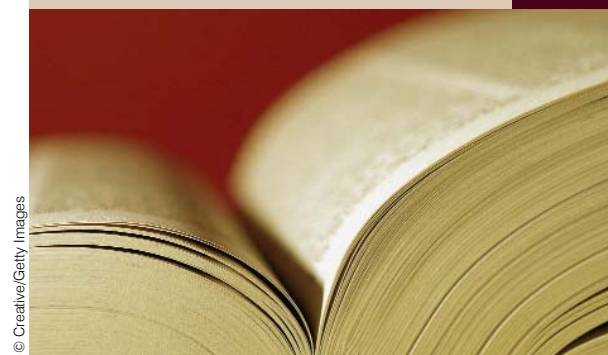
After her participation in a U.S. State Department sponsored Summer Institute Program on "American Literature in the 19th & 20th Centuries" at the University of California, San Diego, in 1993, Dr. Krishna Sen of Calcutta University returned enriched with the vast range and scope of American literature. She was enthusiastic about promoting American literature in colleges and universities in West Bengal, where the curriculum was mainly focused on British literature. Largely due to the efforts of Dr. Sen and Professor Amitava Roy of Rabindra Bharati University, my own interest and support from then Kolkata Public Affairs Officer Janey Cole, the American Literature Study Circle was established and started functioning. That first Circle gathering involved the members listening to and questioning two panelists sitting in Washington, D.C.: Gish Jen, author of *Typical America*, and Belle Yang,

author of *Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father's Shoulders*. Their Indian interlocutors were Dr. Sen and Jayabroto Chatterjee, novelist, filmmaker and corporate communicator.

The inaugural program caught the imagination and aroused interest among academics and students who attended. They publicized it among their colleagues. Younger academics from major West Bengal universities came forward to establish a working committee. Gradually, American literature courses were popularized in universities, and scholars worked on Ph.D. programs on American literature themes. Some scholars expressed their view that American literature is vast, varied and unexplored and they asked: Why not expand knowledge to new research areas? The formation of the Study Circle thus fulfilled a long-felt need, not just to interact on matters of mutual interest in American literature, but also to be able to

interact on an inter-university basis, for which there were not too many opportunities at that time.

The exuberant membership still holds panel discussions like the first one, but also puts on major seminars and workshops on various interdisciplinary areas relating to American studies, with help from the American Center in Kolkata on logistics and formulating and coordinating program plans. These include annual summer courses for undergraduate college teachers teaching American texts at eastern India universities; outreach and support activities at regional universities and undergraduate college campuses, an annual international seminar on African American literature and culture as part of the Black History Month observance in February, as well as the annual international conference on American studies to mark the anniversary of the Study Circle's foundation. One such special event was the commemoration of the birthday of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., in January 2006. The keynote address on "Protest Literature" was delivered by Gopalkrishna Gandhi,



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Bharatiya Vidya Parishad, Vidyasagar University and North Bengal University. Also, Burdwan University and North Bengal University have collaborated with the Study Circle to arrange departmental seminars and conferences at their campuses for students and faculty members.

Smita Basu is a program manager at the American Center, Kolkata, who founded the American Literature Study Circle along with senior academics teaching in West Bengal universities. She continues to be the guiding force of the Circle.